

THE VIEW BENEATH THE BRIDGE

BY YI BAN

Beneath the overpass of Beijing's Second Loop more than 200 people take shelter from the cold winter, having come from all over China to seek justice through petitions to the central authorities. With their unintelligible dialects and unconventional lifestyles, their numbers are steadily growing throughout Beijing, where they are gradually forming into a new stratum of Chinese society.¹

An early morning in December beneath a Beijing overpass

"Wake up, time to go to work!" A woman, Liu Hua, crawls from a plank bed, shouting to her sleeping neighbor, a woman from Shaoguan, Guangdong. Today marks the Winter Solstice, and at a little after seven o'clock dawn has not yet broken in Beijing. As on other days, it is the roar of cars over her head that alerts Liu Hua to the start of a new day.

Regardless of whether she or the other woman wakes up first, their first remark is always "Time to go to work." In fact, they have no place to "go to work"; rather it is the person they will seek out today who is now preparing to go to work. As for the women, they have to prepare their belongings for their day's travels.

Soon afterward, a man beside the woman from Shaoguan crawls from the bed. He is also from Shaoguan, a former schoolteacher. Every night he squeezes in among the others and warms himself in their quilts. On Liu Hua's other side is her husband, a village head. Relying on his hardy physique, he allows the woman from Shaoguan his share of the quilt as he curls next to his wife night after night.

Gradually the entire space under the intersection comes alive. Li Dashu from Anhui, Xiao Qi from Hubei, Meng Yanjun from Hebei—one by one, each sits up on the plank bed. "Shit, it's freezing," Sichuan native Wang Erwa cannot help cursing as she opens her eyes. A blast of cold wind follows her word into the area under the overpass, and those who have left their beds cannot refrain from shivering. The last to awaken is an elderly woman, 92 years old. Supported by her grandson, she has managed to survive another long winter night.

Finally, all 200-odd people have roused themselves, and the air beneath the overpass fills with odors from the plank beds, people's bodies and unwashed clothes, inducing coughs of protest from some of the elders. The five-year-old son of Zhang from Shandong is crying near the exit. "He wants to see his mother—his mother is dead," Zhang says angrily. "His mother was killed by someone. We haven't corrected the injustice yet. His mother was killed for our sake." Zhang says that three years ago, while he was working in a city far from home, village cadres came to his house and demanded money. His wife had none to give them, and was dragged away by the cadres. When Zhang learned of the matter and returned home, all he found was his wife's cold body. The child continues to weep, and Zhang falls silent. Rearranging a bag full of his belongings beneath his pillow, he says he and his son may never see justice in their lifetime.

Someone lights a stove, a discard from someone else's home recovered from a ditch. In this space beneath the intersection, three to five people usually share a stove, and at the moment several dozen stoves are lit, filling the space with black smoke and obliterating the first rays of sunlight. On these stoves they produce their breakfast.

Rush hour beneath the overpass

The morning of December 22, 2003 marks the first day of winter. The central weather report forecasts the warmest first day of winter in Beijing for the past few years, but for the 200-odd people who have gathered beneath the Majia Bao East Road overpass from more than 20 provinces, cities and districts, the cold from the concrete beneath their feet chills them to the bone.

To the north of the overpass is the two-tiered Second Loop, which has eight lanes in each direction. Next to the Loop is a moat that has guarded the imperial city of Beijing for hundreds of years. Despite the relatively warm winter, the water in the moat has frozen almost solid enough to bear a person's weight. The Second Loop is one of the most important thoroughfares in Beijing, carrying more than a million cars to every district in the City. Regardless of whether people are going to the office from home, or from the office to bars or hotels, from the South City to Tiananmen Square or from the North City to the Temple of Heaven, they must pass through the Second Loop.

At the same time, this is only one of many intersections within the 1,000-plus square kilometers of urban Beijing, and few people stop their cars to observe what's going on beneath. No one notices that human lives—daily cooking, eating, drinking and living—are carried on beneath the overpass. As for me, one evening when I was hurrying from my office to dinner with friends at Feng Tai, I was caught in a traffic jam on the overpass; it was then that I noticed a sign stating “Refuge of the Wronged” and saw traces of smoke. A few days later I made a special trip there, and while walking from the west exit of the space to the east exit, I found this scene beneath the overpass.

The space is about 100 meters long and ten meters wide. People have erected simple wooden dividers throughout the space, and within each division are piled worn quilts, clothes and housewares. Within some cubicles I saw people earnestly writing. “They’re composing a petition,” someone told me. Others were curled up in their tatty quilts. “They’re waiting here for a ruling.” Walking from west to east, I could hear dialects from all over China. Although the faces were of all different shapes and colors, they shared in common a blank and dull expression in their response to a passerby.

“We call this space our Bridge Home,” said the woman from Shaoguan.

North of the overpass, within two kilometers of the Second Loop, stands the National People’s Congress. A cheap ride further north on the No.20 bus will take you directly to the Min-

istry of Public Security. To the west is the Beijing South Train Station, where the cheapest trains arrive from everywhere in China. A five minute walk along a little street called Happiness Road to the west of Beijing South Train Station brings you to the National Supreme Court’s Letters and Petitions office. Five minutes from the Second Loop is the Petitioners Financial Assistance Office, and within 15 minutes you can reach the Petitioners Reception Office of the National Procuratorate. Twenty minutes brings you to the reception office of the National Bureau of Letters and Petitions.

The location of the Bridge Home at the nexus of so many government departments has made it the most desirable refuge for people who frequently “go to work” at these departments, especially in sub-zero winter temperatures.

Seeking security beneath the bridge

“When I first began staying here, there were only about ten people under the overpass,” says Liu Hua, now one of the veterans of the group. On August 27, 2003, 40-year-old Liu Hua left her child and her home in the town of Hongling Bao, Shenyang Prefecture, Sujia Village, and came to Beijing to file a petition for her husband. “When I first arrived, the weather was warm, and I hadn’t brought a change of clothes.” Liu Hua says that on her way to the National Supreme Court’s Letters and Petitions office, she noticed people living under the overpass, and after talking with them learned they were petitioners like her. That night, Liu Hua became a resident of the Bridge Home.



A petitioner and her belongings on the streets of Beijing. Photo: AP Wide World Photos

Since Liu Hua had no quilt, she collected a big pile of black plastic sheets. “They’re passable if you line them,” she says casually. After a couple of days Liu Hua became acquainted with the woman from Shaoguan, as well as the 18-year-old Hebei youth, Meng Yanjun, and she curled up with them at night. On September 9, Liu Hua brought some documents to the Ministry of Public Security, where she was intercepted by eight officials from her home village. “They said they would get back to me with a settlement,” and on the basis of that promise she accompanied them back to Shenyang that evening.

“I waited at home for three days, but no one came to deal with the problem, so I came back to Beijing again on the 12th.” Liu Hua says that this time she brought a quilt with her, since the people she’d stayed with before had lost theirs. She shared her quilt with the woman from Shaoguan and the former schoolteacher for a little more than a month until October 21, when the woman from Shaoguan was taken away by Public Security officers from Guangdong who had been summoned by the National Bureau of Letters and Petitions (which has since been disbanded). On November 10, the woman from Shaoguan returned to Beijing to continue her appeal, and met up with Liu Hua again beneath the overpass.

On November 25, Liu Hua went back to her home village, returning to Beijing with her husband on December 9.

Liu Hua’s husband’s name is Yue Yongjin. He and Liu Hua reported the former village committee’s corruption and

embezzlement of public funds, and as a result met with retaliation. In August 2002, even though Yue Yongjin was elected village chairman, the village committee refused to give him a letter of appointment or official seal, and as a result he was unable to perform his official duties. Liu Hua and her husband reported the problem to the higher authorities, but no one came to the village to hear them out. That’s why Li Hua finally decided to come to Beijing to file a petition.

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Life beneath the overpass is full of hardship. “We have to limit our daily living expenses to three yuan,” said the woman from Shaoguan. There is an abandoned waste disposal site near Yongding Meng, from which they salvage discarded doors, windows or scrap wood to carry back for use as firewood. “Last time before I went home I collected a pile of firewood and left it for them,” said Liu Hua, adding that Meng Yanjun, the youngest of the petitioners, is still a child in her eyes.

Water is one of the biggest issues the residents of the Bridge Home face. There are no standpipes for them to access, and they cannot use those of nearby residents. It is also impossible to take water from the frozen moat. Eventually, an old man who watches over a public toilet near Beijing South Train Sta-



A petitioner composes a letter in the shelter of a Beijing bridge. Photo: AP Wide World Photos

tion took pity on them and let them fetch water from there. As for food, three yuan is not sufficient to keep one's stomach full. "We eat two meals a day every day. Sometimes we go to the market on the south side and pick up some cabbage." Liu Hua says people sometimes furtively give them rice and buns that they receive from a visitor's assistance stand.

There is no sense of security beneath the overpass. On November 5, when Beijing experienced its first heavy snow of the winter, at about ten o'clock in the evening, eight urban patrol officers armed with cudgels invaded the space and expelled the residents, confiscating scrap wood they had collected for fuel. On December 10, urban patrol officers returned to the space and destroyed all the residents' stoves, cooking utensils, stocked rice and vegetables before leaving.

Only one happy ending so far

On every Saturday since winter began, five Korean students have come to the Bridge Home at Majia Bao, distributing noodles, buns and eggs to the residents. These visits have become the highlight of the week for the people beneath the overpass.

"So many people have been coming to Beijing to petition for so many years. They start out scattered all over the city, but gather here once it starts getting cold." Four members of 18-year-old Meng Yanjun's family—his father and mother, elder brother and younger brother—were robbed and murdered, but the murderer was not sentenced to death after being caught. Because of this, Meng has been petitioning since he was fourteen years. "I came to Beijing with a dictionary," Meng Yanjun says. He has never finished secondary school, and needs to consult the dictionary when writing his petition and reporting materials. Over the years his new dictionary has become battered and torn. "I've spent a total of 470,000 yuan on my petitions and reports," Meng says. His father ran a pharmaceutical company before he died and the family's circumstances were comfortable, but over the past two years Meng has run through all his family's money and ended up living under the overpass. "Since I first came to this place, only one person's problem has been solved. That person was from Guangxi." Meng Yanjun says very few cases reach a satisfactory resolution through the petition process, and the person from Guangxi seems to have just been lucky. He left the Bridge Home full of joy and with the hearty congratulations of the others. "Just to get some kind of response is considered pretty good," says Meng, observing that most people's petitions disappear like a pebble thrown into the sea.

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Previously, Meng Yanjun had a job in a small hotel, and a colleague helped him write his petition materials. On November 1, Meng Yanjun quit his job at the hotel and began to live under an overpass in Kaiyang with his savings of several hundred yuan, but he was eventually expelled.

Meng Yanjun's efforts have not been entirely wasted. One of China's most influential television programs, China Central

Television's "Interview Focus," has featured him twice, and his family's murder case was sent back to the supreme court of Hebei Province for reexamination. On September 17, 2002, Meng and his elder sister went to Tiananmen Square, where Meng produced a piece of white cloth, spread it near the national flag, and knelt down on it with his sister. He slashed his palm with a knife, letting his fresh blood stain the white cloth. As he was about to go into shock, some policemen took him and his sister away. This incident was reported by quite a few news media, and was referred to in the Western press as the "Tiananmen Flag Incident."

"I don't know when I can stop living under the overpass. I'd like to go back to school." His harsh living conditions and the strain of his years of petitioning have afflicted Meng with heart disease at this tender age. When reaching a particularly dramatic point in his story, Meng suddenly collapses in a faint, but then revives and continues to talk about his experiences as if nothing had happened.

As I was completing this article, I learned from a photographer I worked with that one morning more than ten police cars surrounded the overpass near Beijing South Train Station, and more than one hundred police officers and urban control personnel expelled all the residents of the Bridge Home. My photographer was present at the time, and said he saw many people arrested and loaded into police vehicles. He saw people screaming, crying and swearing. The whole clearance process took more than an hour.

One day at the end of December, I visited the space under the overpass again. It was completely cleared from east to west, and not a single trace of people's lives remained. I felt as if everything I had seen before was a dream.

Translated by Akiko Kageyama

1. This article was originally published in the February 5 (No.21) edition of HRIC's Internet newsletter, Huaxia Bao.